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Aristotle against Delos: pleasure in *Nicomachean Ethics* X

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Abstract

Two crucial questions, if unanswered, impede our understanding of Aristotle's account of pleasure in EN X.4-5: a) what are the activities that pleasure is said to complete, and b) in virtue of what does pleasure *always* accompany these activities? The answers fall in place if we read Aristotle as responding to the Delian challenge that the finest, best, and most pleasant are not united in one and the same thing (EN I.8). I propose an "ethical" reading of EN X.4 according to which the best activities in question are those integral to the exercise of virtue.

Key words: Aristotle; Nicomachean Ethics; Pleasure; Delian inscription; virtuous action

§1 Introduction

An inscription at the temple of Delos attributes 'best', 'finest', and 'most pleasant' to different things:

‘Finest is what is most just, best is being healthy, but most pleasant, by nature, is getting what one loves.’ (EN I.8.1099a27-28, cf. EE I.1.1214a5-6).¹

However convincing it may initially seem that the best, the finest, and the pleasantest are separable (and often separated), Aristotle sets out to show — against a reputable opinion, no less — that these three fundamental values are combined to the highest degree in human happiness: they are not attributes of different things, but only of one, the highest good (EN I.8.1099a24-5; EE I.1.1214a7-8). While the inscription does not quite seem to have the prominence in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that it does in the *Eudemian* which practically starts out with it, it is no less significant for the EN. In outline, Aristotle argues in the EN (on which I will focus exclusively) that i) happiness is what is best (I.7.1097b22-4); ii) activity in accordance with excellence is best (I.7.1098a16-18); iii) activity in accordance with excellence is finest (Books III-V and IX.8.1169a9).² He does not properly address iv) activity in accordance with excellence is most pleasant until Book X.

Reading the discussion of pleasure in Book X as addressing the Delian challenge illuminates Aristotle’s account of pleasure in Book X.4-5.³ In particular, it helps us to become clearer about two central issues, the scope of Aristotle’s account, and the connection between pleasure and activity. I argue, first, that Aristotle does not need to provide a general account of the connection between pleasure and activity.⁴ If his account of pleasure tackles the Delian inscription, his approach can be more

1. Translations are my own (though inspired by Rowe), unless stated otherwise.

2. See esp. 1101a2; 1122b9; 1123a8; cf. 1115a31.

3. The EN contains a further discussion of pleasure in VII.11-14, a book shared with the *Eudemian Ethics*. I shall focus here entirely on the account of pleasure in Book X, because understanding each treatise on its own is prerequisite for relating them fruitfully. On EN VII see Frede 2009, Rapp 2009, and Aufderheide 2013.

4. Many interpreters take Aristotle to do just that, see Bostock 1988; Taylor 2008; Pakaluk 2005; Frede 2006; Shields 2011.

circumscribed: he only needs to show the *best* activities to be most pleasant — which is what he indeed does.⁵ Since Aristotle focuses on perception and thought and makes *them* out to be most pleasant, I propose an “ethical” reading of the passage: the activities in question belong to the exercise of virtue.⁶ Second, if the activities of perception are thus identified, we can make good sense of Aristotle’s otherwise puzzling claim that whoever engages in the best activities will always enjoy these activities.⁷ For no one can engage in the best activities in the best way unless she is a lover of the relevant objects and activities — which forges the close connection between pleasure and the best activities Aristotle requires for rebutting the Delian inscription.⁸

§2 The connection between I.8 and X.4

Why should the best life also be the most pleasant life? Aristotle pays heed to a wide range of reputable claims about happiness: ‘for some people think it is excellence, others that it is wisdom, others a kind of intellectual accomplishment; others think that it is these, or one of these, together with pleasure or not without pleasure, while others include external prosperity as well’ (1098b23-6, tr. Rowe). He takes his conception of the best life to harmonise with the sayings, all of which contain some truth, as a true

5. Gonzalez 1991, 144 notes the importance of the superlatives and criticises Bostock 1988 for not taking any notice of it (Gonzalez 1991, 151 n. 16). Strohl 2011, 267-71 also takes account of the superlatives.

6. That pleasure are “ethically loaded” for Aristotle is not usually disputed (see Annas 1980 for a clear exposition). Indeed, Frede 2006, 267 raises the problem for Aristotle that he ‘equates completeness of the activity with its perfection from a moral point of view.’ It is, however, controversial that Aristotle has ethical perception in mind in X.4. In fact, I have found no interpreter who advances this thesis. (Gauthier and Jolif 1958, 842 mention ‘vertu’, but this is nothing more than well-functioning.) See Gonzalez 1991 and especially Taylor 2008 for the difficulties in identifying the best activities of perception.

7. van Riel 2000, 77 takes this to be the main shortcoming of Aristotle’s theory. Strohl 2011 seeks to address van Riel’s criticism. See also Harte 2014, 301-9 for a subtle version and discussion of this problem.

8. Frede 2014, 99 also emphasises the importance of “love” for pleasure and other affective responses in virtuous action.

definition of happiness should (1098b9-12). Aristotle can account for the truth in the sayings but not by identifying happiness with excellent states such as virtue of character or wisdom; rather, their activations are key to happiness (1098b31-1099a7). A person possessing the excellent states, a good person, enjoys the sorts of activities and actions she performs *qua* good person (1099a13-21), ‘for ... the sort of person who does not enjoy fine actions does not even count as a person of excellence: no one would call a person just if he failed to enjoy acting justly ... and similarly in other cases’ (1099a17-20). Aristotle effectively claims the best life to be pleasant in itself (1099a7): enjoying excellent activities simply belongs to excellence. Were a person generally to remain indifferent about her good activities, then Aristotle would take her lack of pleasure to be a sign of a lack of virtue (II.3). Thus, by tying pleasure to the exercise of excellent states, Aristotle can make pleasure an integral part of the best life.

Having outlined how the three values — the good, the fine, and the pleasant — do coincide in his conception of happiness via the exercise of excellence, Aristotle turns towards the further question why the good person’s life has all three values *most*: ‘if that is so, actions in accordance with excellence will be pleasant in themselves. But (ἀλλὰ μὴν) they will also be both *good* and fine, and will be each of these to the highest degree (μάλιστα τούτων ἕκαστον), if the person of excellence judges them well’ (1099a21-3, continuing previous quote).⁹ Since Aristotle’s previous argument only warrants the conclusion that doing what is fine and good is also pleasant in itself, but not that such actions are superlatively pleasant,¹⁰ the whole case against the Delian inscription and for Aristotle’s view that ‘happiness is what is best, and finest, and pleasantest’ (a24-5) hangs on the good person’s judgement. But since Aristotle says

9. εἰ δ’ οὕτω, καθ’ αὐτὰς ἂν εἶεν αἱ κατ’ ἀρετὴν πράξεις ἡδεῖαι. ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ ἀγαθαί γε καὶ καλαί, καὶ μάλιστα τούτων ἕκαστον, εἴπερ καλῶς κρίνει περὶ αὐτῶν ὁ σπουδαῖος·

10. Pace Woods 1982, 44.

nothing more about the good person's judgement here, and why it should be decisive, this argument is at best an allusion to an argument found elsewhere.

Aristotle takes up the Delian challenge to make the best life most pleasant at the end of his discussion of pleasure in an argument that expands on the "good man" argument to which Book I alludes (X.5.1176a3-29). The good man argument in turn rests on a claim about the nature of pleasure: pleasure must not be a uniform feeling or experience: were pleasure undifferentiated, the predication of 'most pleasant' would turn on quantitative differences between pleasures only — in which case the good person's life hardly stands a chance against other more pleasure oriented life-styles, especially in terms of intensity.¹¹ Thus, the argument in X.5 turns crucially on differentiating pleasures into kinds (1175a21-b24) because it allows Aristotle to take into consideration the quality pertaining to each kind, rather than merely quantitative properties.

To argue that some kinds of pleasure are better than others, Aristotle offers two supporting thoughts. First, following Plato (*Republic* 581c), he maintains that kinds of pleasure differ in purity. Aristotle alludes to Plato here because Plato makes abundantly clear that 'X is more pleasant than Y' does not mean that X gives pleasure more frequently, or that X-pleasures are more intense than Y-pleasures (584b). Rather, for

11. Admittedly, 'X is most pleasant' tends to connote to us primarily the quantitative aspects of a pleasant experience. Evidence from Aristotle's other works, however, suggest that 'most pleasant' may not have the same connotations for him. In a curious passage from the *Protepticus* Aristotle considers that sleep is most pleasant, where this does not entail that it is choice-worthy (101.1). This surely shows that intensity is not necessary for being most pleasant. Other passages confirm that quantitative aspects do not seem to be at the top of Aristotle's mind for judging something to be most pleasant. He mentions contemplation (*Met.* 1072b24), learning (*Poet.* 1448b13; cf. *Rhet.* 1410b12), (wise) ruling (*Rhet.* 1371b26), helping guests or friends (*Pol.* 1263b5-6). Further, among the most pleasant things he counts human beings (*EE* 1237a28-9), friends (cf. *EE* 1246a12-17), music (*Pol.* 1339b20), and honour and good reputation (*Rhet.* 1371a8-9). None of these seem to make a point about quantitative dimensions of pleasure, but rather about the quality. I thank MM McCabe for pressing me on this point.

Plato the real criterion for pleasantness is whether X-pleasures are purer than Y-pleasures (585b-586a). Just as any small amount of pure white colour is whiter than any amount of impure white, so any amount of pure pleasure is more pleasant than any amount of impure pleasures (*Philebus* 52d-53c). While Aristotle joins Plato in rejecting frequency or intensity as criteria for establishing which kind of pleasure is most pleasant, and opting with purity for a qualitative criterion, Aristotle does not follow Plato in finding the fault in pleasure's being mixed with pain (X.3.1173b15-19). Instead, since pleasure belongs properly to the soul (I.8.1099a8), Aristotle might now suggest that bodily involvement taints pleasure, making it less what it really is.¹² So, the less the body is involved, the more pure — and the more pleasant — the pleasure.¹³

Aristotle develops the point further and relates the criterion of purity to the task of showing the good person's life to be most pleasant by connecting pleasure to function: just as human beings have a characteristic or congenial function, so they should have a congenial kind of pleasure too (*oikeion*. 1176a4) — despite the variety of people's peeves and pleasures. Now Aristotle turns to the good person: the good person's characteristic activities will be excellent activities of the rational part of the soul (both of the commanding and of the listening part, cf. I.13.1102b13-1103a2), a result gained by explicitly considering what is distinctive about human beings (I.7).¹⁴ Therefore, the pleasures following upon and completing/perfecting the good person's activities (qua good person) are also most properly (*kuriôs*) called human pleasures

12. Note, all the activities mentioned (smelling, hearing etc, 1176a1-3) are taken from III.10, most of them verbatim, where Aristotle distinguishes between pleasures of the body and pleasures of the soul (III.10.1117b28-29).

13. Gonzalez 1991, 151-159 reaches a similar conclusion through linking purity, pleasantness, and completeness.

14. Although Aristotle brushes the activities of the nutritive soul aside as irrelevant for human virtue (I.13.1102a28-b3), he does not comment on the status of perception in I.13. As III.10 makes clear, the pleasures stemming from perception can be more carnal and bestial, but also more spiritual and human, such as listening to music.

(1176a27-28).¹⁵ Since the pleasures stem from the exercise of the rational part of the soul, they ought to outshine other pleasures in terms of purity and hence be most pleasant (in the qualitative sense). Thus, the good person lives a most pleasant life, not because this life provides pleasure most frequently or involves the most intense or extended pleasure, but because its central activities stem from the exercise of human excellence and the associated pleasures differ in kind from less human pleasures: the pleasures of excellent activity are pleasures most of all. Since no other activity can provide pleasure of this kind, no engaging in other activities will be able to make a life more pleasant than the life of excellent activity.

The success of Aristotle's argument against the Delian description depends crucially on the connection between an activity and its pleasure. For the argument to be successful, the pleasure should follow on the best activity not merely contingently. The Delian inscription allows that a life may be best, finest, and most pleasant, but denies that it contains the maxima of the values due to a single cause. To make a single thing responsible for maximal goodness, fineness, and pleasantness, Aristotle must argue, as he does, that the best and finest activity itself contains pleasure: the good life must be pleasant in itself through its central activity. But how does Aristotle spell out the 'must'? What is the more-than-contingent connection between pleasure and the best activity? Aristotle develops his answer in X.4 to which I now turn.

§3 Pleasure as enjoyment

15. Aristotle continues: 'The other ones only secondarily so [sc. human], or even further removed.' The exact nature of the relation is left unclear. The point here can be developed in parallel to questions about the happiest and secondarily happiest life in X.7-8, but this lies beyond the scope of the present article. Various ways of taking *kuriōs*, see Charles 1999 and Scott 1999.

Aristotle outlines the connection between pleasure and activity in the following passage:

And it is also clear that it [pleasure arises] most of all when the sense is most outstanding and active in relation to an object so specified; and when both the sense and the sense-object are so specified, there will always be pleasure, at least as long as both what produces and what receives are present. And the pleasure completes/perfects the activity not as the underlying state, but as a sort of superadded (epiginomenon)¹⁶ end (telos), like the bloom on those in their prime.¹⁷ As long, then, as the object of thought or perception is as it should be, and [so is] what discriminates or reflects, there will be pleasure in the activity; for when the receptor and the producer are similar and in the same relation to each other, the same naturally arises. (X.4.1174b28-1175a3).

The passage illuminates the connection between pleasure and activity in several ways. 1) The connection is one of perfection or completion: pleasure perfects or completes the activity; 2) the activity completed/perfected is best insofar as an excellent state is active in relation to an excellent object; and 3) pleasure always accompanies the best activities. Claim 3) plays, of course, a crucial role in Aristotle's anti-Delian argument, as does claim 2) by pointing to the best activities. I shall start by examining

16. The standard translation for epiginomenon is 'supervenient'. Because modern connotations with 'supervenience' might be misleading, I translate the word, with Burnet 1900 and Joachim 1955, as 'superadded'.

17. My rendering of the Greek in 1174b31-33 seeks to convey the indeterminacy of the original. The simile can alternatively be translated thus: pleasure completes or perfects the activity ... as a sort of superadded end, like ...

(1) the springtime of life on those in their prime (after Gosling and Taylor 1982);

(2a) the bloom of manhood on those in their prime (Rowe in Broadie and Rowe 2002);

(2b) the bloom of youth on those in the flower of their age (Ross in *Aristotle Complete Works* 1991).

the most basic element of the key claims, the notion of pleasure, in order to shed light on the relationship between pleasure and the activity.

What does Aristotle mean by ‘pleasure’ in the passage quoted? Pleasure (*hêdonê*) can be understood in two conceptually related ways, either as an object, something one can indulge in or abstain from, or as a certain affective attitude an agent may have towards such an object or a situation that features such an object prominently.¹⁸ We can call the former ‘source-pleasure’ and the latter, for want of a better word, ‘enjoyment’.¹⁹ Specifying this affective response precisely proves difficult, partly because pleasure in the sense of enjoyment ranges over such a variety of phenomena, e.g. being absorbed in a good book, tasting something delicious, sex, being proud of one’s children, or even doing philosophy when it goes well. Given the felt difference between the pleasure we derive from sex and the pleasure we derive from reading a book, we should not think of pleasure as a unified, detachable feeling; the feeling or subjective experience is only an important part of the complex attitude we have in response to such pleasurable objects.²⁰

A parallel passage from II.3 helps to determine Aristotle’s meaning in X.4. The earlier passage also contrasts source-pleasures with enjoyment. For a moderate person, the act of holding back from a bodily pleasure gives rise to pleasure: she will do so cheerfully. A self-indulgent person, by contrast, will be upset at passing over the bodily pleasure, thus revealing her self-indulgence (1104b5-7). Clearly, Aristotle describes a

18. In II.5.1105b21-23 Aristotle classes more specific affective responses such as desire and anger under the umbrella of pleasure and pain, as either pleasure or pain is consequential (*hepetai*) upon any emotion.

19. Aristotle makes this distinction in an argument against Plato at X.3.1173a17-23. See Shields 2011, 193-195 for an excellent statement of this distinction.

20. These examples show that the enjoyment is caused by something (what *hêdonê* is *epi*), but that the object of enjoyment does not have to be what gives rise to it: reading a good story causes my enjoyment, but the object of my enjoyment need not be the activity of reading (as such), rather than the plot of the novel.

difference in attitude more than a difference in source pleasure when he cites the example in support of the claim that ‘the pleasure or pain that is superadded to what people do should be treated as a sign of their dispositions (*hexeis*)...’ (b3-5): the superadded pleasure (*epiginomenên hêdonên*, 1104b4) must be understood as the pleasure taken in or occasioned by that activity (*chairein*, b6), i.e. the agent’s enjoyment. Since Aristotle uses the same expression, a participle of *epiginesthai*, X.4.1174b31-3 to make a point about the connection between pleasure and the activity, we can safely assume the sense of ‘pleasure’ to be the same in both cases.²¹ Thus when Aristotle claims pleasure to complete/perfect an activity, he means that the person’s enjoyment completes/perfects the activity (where the object of pleasure can be the activity or the object of that activity).

By narrowing down the meaning of ‘pleasure’ in X.4.1174b28-1175a3 (quoted above) we have made progress in understanding the central claim that pleasure perfects or completes the activity. But how *does* enjoyment do that? Enjoyment could complete or perfect the activity either a) by being *the* perfection of an otherwise imperfect or incomplete activity or b) by being *a* (further) perfection of an already perfect or complete activity. Thus, interpretation a) builds enjoyment into the definition of a perfect or complete activity, whereas interpretation b) must postulate several dimensions in which an activity can be complete or perfect so that an activity can count as perfect or complete without being so in every respect. Aristotle’s text does not clearly indicate which reading we should prefer, at least not on textual grounds. For the only positive characterisation of how pleasure functions — that ‘pleasure completes/perfects

21. Note that 1174b31-3 and II.3.1104b3-7 are the only passages in the whole Corpus that couple the participle of *epiginesthai* (here translated as superadded) with *hêdonê*. The only other passage that speaks of *hêdonê epiginesthai*, *Rhet.* 1370b26, is also about enjoyment or delight.

the activity ... as a sort of superadded end' — is illustrated by an image which can be taken to support either reading.²²

On philosophical grounds, interpretation a) seems to have the advantage over b) insofar as it would at once establish a necessary connection between a perfect activity and pleasure which would drive Aristotle's anti-Delian argument. However, unlike interpretation b), a) runs the risk of tying pleasure too closely to the perfect activity. If part of what it is for an activity to be perfect is to be enjoyed, we cannot say that an agent's enjoyment completes/perfects a perfect activity on pain of a regress. Interpretation a) must therefore find a way of specifying the almost-best activities which, when enjoyed, become best and perfect. Thus both interpretations must specify the relevant activities to be enjoyed, and do so in a way that is independent of their being enjoyed: b) calls them 'perfect' or 'complete'; a) does not. But once the activities are identified without reference to pleasure, the connection between the best activities (or almost-best) and enjoyment ceases to be necessary — in which case we must ask, again, what entitles Aristotle to claim that pleasure in the sense of enjoyment always accompanies the best activities.

§4 Pleasure and the best activities

How does Aristotle link pleasure and the best activity? In particular, if we understand pleasure as enjoyment, how can pleasure always follow on the best activity? X.4.1174b28-1175a3 (quoted at the beginning of §3) contains part of an answer to the first question: since Aristotle ties pleasure exclusively to perception and thought, enjoying an activity seems to hang on the perceiving and/or thinking essential to the

22. Roughly, interpretation a) would translate along the lines of (1) in n. 17, whereas interpretation b) would suggest (2a) or (2b). See Bostock 2000, 156-8 for the interpretive implications of these different translations, and Warren 2015 for a close study of the image.

activity.²³ The key to the second question lies, I submit, in specifying which activities are completed/perfected by pleasure. If, as I have argued, Aristotle's discussion of pleasure in EN X.4 feeds into refuting the Delian inscription, Aristotle might either propose a general theory of pleasure or concentrate only on activities and pleasures relevant for the anti-Delian argument, activities central to happiness. Accordingly, we can understand the main tenets of X.4.1174b28-1175a3 in two ways: either 2a) the activity completed/perfected is *absolutely* best insofar as an *absolutely* excellent state is active in relation to an *absolutely* excellent object; and 3a) pleasure always accompanies the *absolutely* best activities, or 2b) the activity completed/perfected is best *in a certain domain* insofar as an excellent state *in a certain domain* is active in relation to an excellent object *in a certain domain*; and 3b) pleasure always accompanies the best activities *in a certain domain*. While Aristotle has something to say about the connection between pleasure and best activity in restricted domains such as crafts, he casts his eye on the unrestricted claim that pleasure accompanies best activities of perception and thought, i.e. the thoughts and perceptions essential to the best activities *tout court*.

Aristotle would do well to focus exclusively on the best activities *tout court*. For only the unrestrictedly best activities afford a connection between pleasure and activity sufficiently close to rebut the Delian inscription, as only the best activities *tout court* are internally connected to affective responses, among them pleasure. Very roughly, while an excellent builder may exercise her craft on excellent material in an excellent project, nothing in the nature of the craft or the object makes her necessarily enjoy her building. Usually builders will enjoy their building when it goes well, but that is because of their attitude towards building, an attitude independent from having the craft. Excellent

23. Cf. Bostock 1988, 271.

people, too, will enjoy their excellent activities, but here the attitude forms part of the excellent states being activated. Enjoying the best activities human beings can engage in, activities of (human) excellence, belongs to engaging in them in the first place, as stated in I.8. I leave the details and discussion for the next section; for now I want to trace why it matters on which activities Aristotle focuses in X.4 and thus motivate my “ethical” reading of X.4 according to which Aristotle seeks to establish 2a) and 3a).

The context helps establish that the best perceptions and thoughts which pleasure completes essentially belong to the best (human) activities *tout court*: the activities of (human) excellence. Immediately before X.4.1174b28-1175a3, Aristotle likens pleasure to seeing (*horasis*, 1174b12; cf. a14) to show that pleasure is complete in form and not an incomplete activity. He thereby counters the argument that pleasure cannot be (the) good because pleasure is a movement and movements are incomplete (1174a14-16), whereas the good is complete. Aristotle refutes this view primarily to prove a point about value: its nature does not prevent pleasure from being (the) good. If we take Aristotle to continue pursuing the topic of value — he certainly does not indicate a shift in topic — also in the next argument (beginning at 1174b14) which focuses on the perceptual (and dianoetical) basis of pleasure, we can more easily see which activities of perception and thought Aristotle supposes to be ‘most complete/perfect and most pleasant’ (b19-20). Aristotle makes the object which activates the sense essential to the best and most complete/perfect activities of perception. A sense or faculty is completely or perfectly active (*teleiôs*) only when it is in a good condition and directed at the finest (*kalliston*) object falling under the sense (1174b14-16). Such activities are thought to be complete/perfect most of all (*teleia ... malista*, b15-16), and ‘most perfect’ activities (*teleiotatê*, b20; b22-3): for every sense, the activity is best (*beltistê*, b18) when the sense is in the best condition (*arista*, b18)

and active in relation to the most outstanding object (*kratiston*, b19). Taken out of context, Aristotle may seem to speak about perception in a physiological sense, suggesting that proper perceptibles are best when they are most lively, forceful, or clear.²⁴ But in the context of pleasure, such an interpretation would lead to the wrong results, as objects and senses thus specified completely sidestep the connection to pleasure.²⁵ Understood as a point about pleasure and its value, Aristotle, by asking when an activity is fully or most complete/perfect (*teleiotaton*), implies that an activity can be complete in form without yet being fully complete/perfect: a perceptual activity complete in form is most perfect/complete only when the object is finest, best, and most outstanding.

Aristotle's mention of 'finest' and 'best' helpfully points in the direction of the further sense of completeness/perfection. At I.7, Aristotle introduces a hierarchy of ends (*telê*), according to which proper ends are to be pursued for their own sakes: anything essentially subordinate to something else will not be *teleios* without qualification, whereas everything not subordinate to anything will be most *teleios* (1097a22-b6).²⁶ Reminding ourselves of this sense of *teleios* and of the context in which it is introduced serves understanding the passage in X.4 for two reasons. Firstly, 'fine' often contrasts with necessary and subordinate activities.²⁷ When animals perceive, their activity of perception will be formally complete, and often be perfectly executed. Despite their keen senses, animal perception falls short of being fully *teleios* insofar as their perception and pleasure stemming from that perception are confined to the necessary. Every pleasure an animal may have in perception takes its root in necessary activities,

24. Reeve 2012, 34.

25. As Kenny's manure example shows (Kenny 1963, 104).

26. More precisely, X is more *teleios* than Y iff

a) X is (to be) pursued for its own sake and Y for the sake of Z or b) X and Y are (to be) pursued for their own sakes and Y is (to be) pursued also for the sake of X.

27. Lear 2006, 126.

such as eating (cf. EN III.10.1118a16-22): an animal cannot take non-necessary pleasures, such as enjoying the smell of flowers (EE 1231a10-11). Animal perception thus belongs to essentially subordinate activities. While some characteristically human perception and thought will belong to essentially subordinate activities, such as crafts, not all will be: the best and most *teleios* perceptions and thoughts will be integral to activities not essentially subordinate.²⁸

The reference to the finest objects of perception firmly points away from ordinary animal perception tied to perceiving what is necessary for the animal and towards “higher” perception. In fact, as the superlative shows, Aristotle looks at the “highest” kind of perception requiring the most highly developed states. Keeping I.7 in mind helps, secondly, to guard against a purely aesthetic reading of the passage as proposed by Gonzalez 1991, 153-4: ‘It is in sight of a beautiful object that seeing is pursued for its own sake. Therefore, the activity of seeing is most complete (*teleiotatê*), i.e. to the greatest degree its own end (*telos*), precisely when its object is beautiful (*kallos*).’ Note, however, that Aristotle does not exclusively describe the objects as finest, but also as most outstanding (1174b18) and most excellent (*spoudaiotaton*, b22-3). According to the aesthetic reading, the terms would have to be either (near) synonyms, or there must be good reasons why they should coincide in perceiving the beautiful. Aristotle endorses neither option. Instead, he shows in response to the Delian inscription that the best and finest coincide in virtuous activity. In I.7 Aristotle identifies the most *teleios* activity *for human beings* with the exercise of virtue, and virtuous activity, more than any other activity, is fine insofar as it aims at the fine (Books III-IV; IX.8.1169b23-31). What he seeks to show in X.4-5 is that *these* activities, activities

28. Some interpreters, such as Bostock 1988, detect a shift in the use of the word *teleios* at 1174b14, from meaning formal completion to qualitative perfection. On my interpretation there is no shift as incomplete activities are subordinate to the goal towards which they lead.

central to the best life, are also the most pleasant. The aesthetic reading would interfere with this project: if Aristotle were to put aesthetic pleasures at the top of pleasantness, then the most pleasant activity would no longer be integrated in the life of virtue. Thus, we should not restrict the scope of the best activities to any domain of essentially subordinate activities, nor to what *we* would call the ‘aesthetic’, but take the superlatives as pointing towards the best activities *tout court*. The finest objects will be the fine in virtuous activity.

My interpretation rests on the assumption that the fine *can* be perceived: the best perceptions are not merely associated with the best activities, they are also *of* the finest and best objects; and if the best activities are the best and finest objects, then the perceiver must be able to perceive them as fine. Perceiving consists in discriminating different objects in one’s perceptual field, and to see certain distinctions among the non-proper perceptibles, one needs to have the relevant concepts. Once a person has acquired concept X, she is able to see certain objects as X. For instance, one can *perceive* whether this is bread or whether it is baked properly (III.3.1113a1-2). The example highlights that one can perceive in the practical sphere of crafts whether things are done properly, or ‘as they should’ (*hôs dei*, a1): a craftsperson can perceive whether a product is good and as it should be by perceiving whether the product hits the mean in the various parameters defining the quality of a product. Since Aristotle introduces the concept of the mean in the practical sphere more narrowly construed by analogy to craft — as in craft, actions are right when they hit the mean in the relevant parameters (II.6.1106b9-16) — we can surely perceive the *hôs dei* also in conduct. A trained eye will discern whether a person’s anger does not arise too late or too early, is not too intense or mild, is not held for too long or short: ‘such things [sc. when an action is blameworthy and missing the mean] lie in the particular situations, and judgement of

these lies in perception’ (II.9.1109b22-3; IV.5.1126b4). Thus, just as a baker can *see* that the bread is good, so a virtuous person can *see* that an action is good by perceiving that the parameters are in the mean. Hitting the mean in all dimensions is difficult and rare: actions that succeed are praiseworthy and fine (II.9.1109a29-30; cf. II.6.1106b24-35). Thus, agents who can see the mean and competently predicate ‘fine’ will be able to perceive good and praiseworthy actions as fine.²⁹

Why does the best activity of perception come about only when both object and the state activated are in excellent condition? “Ethical” perception, Aristotle reminds us, depends importantly on character. While every half-way decent person will see egregious acts of justice or injustice as especially fine or foul, not everyone will perceive all the features that make the action stand out (II.9) and thereby fall short of completely or perfectly perceiving the situation. It takes especially developed states reliably to discern all the relevant features of a practical situation and perceive them correctly — which comes out especially in difficult cases. Aristotle makes perceiving correctly what is good in a given situation a mark of the good person, likening him to ‘a carpenter’s rule or measure’: what seems good to him in any given situation really is

29. The mean and the fine align nicely if we take order, symmetry, and definiteness to constitute the fine (Met. XIII.3.1078a36-b1 with Lear 2006, 118).

By pointing to the perception of the fine I do not need to contradict the claim that there is also a rational activity of appreciating something as fine (Lear, 2006, 131 and Coope 2012, 155-6). Even if determining the mean is a rational activity, whether an action falls under the mean and hence counts as fine remains a matter of perception — in which case there is both an intellectual and a perceptual pleasure in the fine (cf. Moss 2012, 209).

According to Moss 2012, 213 the pleasant perception is the good person’s ‘pleasurable awareness that renders the virtuous life pleasant — the awareness that one is virtuous — [which] is characterized as a form of perception.’ If proposed as the exclusive source of pleasure for the good life qua good life, I would disagree, as a person’s awareness of herself as virtuous relies on the more basic perception of her actions as virtuous (cf. 1174b26-8 where Aristotle speaks of the objects in question as visible or audible things — and that would not be objects of self-awareness, or only in an attenuated sense). Similarly, others, especially friends, can be perceived as having a good character, but again such perceptions must proceed on the basis of the perceived person’s actions as fine and good.

good, ‘for the good person discriminates correctly in every set of circumstances, and in every set of circumstances what is true is apparent to him.’ (III.4.1113a29-31). Importantly, the superior discriminative ability, i.e. the good person’s perceptual ability reliably to discern the fine in particular, is entrenched in the good person’s states of character (*hexeis*): ‘for each disposition has its own corresponding range of fine and pleasant things’ (a31; cf. III.5.1114a31ff.). So, seeing the best actions, actions in the middle, as fine and pleasant, seeing them as one should see them, requires ethical virtue: the best perception of the best objects must be informed by the best states, the virtues.³⁰

§5 Pleasure and love

On the “ethical” reading of X.4 Aristotle attends especially to the connection between pleasure and the best activities *tout court*. The good person’s ability to discern what is good goes hand in hand with her discerning and enjoying what is really pleasant, as the good and the pleasant coincide for her. The craftsperson, by contrast, will only discern what is good for achieving the goal of his craft, but need not automatically enjoy what is pleasant for a carpenter or a shoemaker. While enjoying a certain activity makes a person want to pursue it (X.5), and thus more likely to excel at it, there is no internal connection between making shoes well and enjoying it: the best shoemaker *could* be completely indifferent to his excellent shoemaking without thereby casting doubt on his skill. A virtuous person *could not* be indifferent to her excellent actions: the best activities of perception and thought, those integral to the use of virtue, do have an internal connection between performing them perfectly and enjoying them: a connection in the person’s character.

30. The considerations presented here will hardly convert those committed to denying that one can literally perceive a fine action. I don’t need to: I think most of my argument can be recast in non-literal terms: if ‘perceive’ can mean ‘intellectually see on the basis of perception’ (e.g. in VI.8), then ‘perception’ in X.4 could be read in the same way.

Running up to rejecting the Delian inscription in EN I.8, Aristotle reminds his readers of the well-known connection between a person's being a lover of X, i.e. a trait of her character, and her habitually enjoying X or X-related activities (*chairein* 1099a17-20):³¹ 'to each person that thing is pleasant in relation to which he is called "lover of" that sort of thing, as for example a horse is to the horse-lover, a spectacle to the theatre-lover; and in the same way what is just is also pleasant to the lover of justice, and generally the things in accordance with excellence to the lover of excellence.' (I.8.1099a8-11, tr. Rowe). For the lover of X, there is an internal connection between engaging in the beloved activity and habitually enjoying it, and as Aristotle's examples show, one can come to love pretty much anything. Thus, 'suppose my favourite music is Beethoven's fourth Piano Concerto, and I have the occasion to listen to it performed by a great soloist. I listen carefully, and there is not the slightest impediment to my activity of listening. Does this guarantee my pleasure?' By referring to the basic connection between being a lover of X and habitually enjoying X, Aristotle can simply answer 'yes'.³² But rooting enjoyment in character helps refute the Delian inscription only if Aristotle can specify the internal connection non-vacuously and if one *can* come to love and thus habitually enjoy the best and finest activities.

Aristotle characterises the good person as lover of the fine (*philokalos*, I.8.1099a13). It is possible to love and habitually enjoy the fine — but not easy. In particular, Aristotle notes, virtue requires thorough training from a young age because

31. Cf. III.10.1117b29-30. That lovers of X enjoy X is a commonplace, see e.g. Plato's *Republic* (see esp. IX.581a-c). This claim seems to hold 'always or for the most part'. Note that Aristotle recognises also a slightly different, and pejorative, use of 'philo-X' where a person is indeed called 'lover of X' because she excessively enjoys X (III.11.1118b22-25). This use differs, however, from Aristotle's, as e.g. lovers of the fine, surely do not enjoy the fine excessively, but just right.

32. The question is taken from van Riel 2000, 74. Aristotle would regard van Riel's answer that 'pleasure is by no means guaranteed' as misguided (van Riel 2000, 77). I thank Dorothea Frede for helping me to see that.

once the initial impulses become ossified, they are almost impossible to change, and the initial impulses towards certain kinds of pleasure and pain stand in the way of discerning and enjoying the fine (II.3.1104b11-13). Children need to form the character traits that enable them to do what is right even if they do not feel like doing so. If properly trained, they will come to disregard their initial reluctance to perform daunting or otherwise intimidating tasks as long as they grasp that this task is to be done because it is right. By learning to choose actions for their own sakes children start forming a sense of the fine, as fine actions are characteristically chosen for their own sakes.³³ Whether they feel like doing the right thing, whether they enjoy doing so, does not enter as a question at this stage of their development which prepares the learners for acquiring the virtues. The virtues cannot be acquired merely through verbal training, but only through a more comprehensive approach: words can only truly make a person good who has already ‘a character that is noble and truly loves the fine’ (*philokalon*, X.9.1179b8-9). Thus a character that loves (*stergein*) the fine and is disgusted (*duscherainein*) by the shameful (b30-31) must already be in place if the person is to become fully virtuous, and the initial training of overcoming childish impulses lays the foundation for the further steps. However the good person comes to be a lover of the fine, it is clear that love of the fine is not a learner’s crutch, but a crucial character trait that remains when virtue is fully acquired — hence the good person’s characterisation as a lover of the fine (*philokalos*, I.8.1099a13): love of the fine, as specified in the relevant spheres of action, is characteristic of the good person.³⁴

33. Broadie 1991, 107-9.

34. Is the love of honour or justice innate or acquired through social conditioning? Aristotle does not say (though see Frede 2014, §5). In any case, while he acknowledges that some natural virtue has to be present even in small children, the love children have for the fine differs from that of those who have tasted acting for the sake of the fine more fully: mature love needs to grow.

Given the close connection between enjoyment and a person's character, a habitual lack of pleasure in doing what one should reveals a person's lack of virtue: 'for ... the sort of person who does not enjoy fine actions does not even count as a person of excellence: no one would call a person just if he failed to enjoy acting justly ... and similarly in other cases' (1099a17-20). As a lover of the fine, the good person will habitually enjoy the fine. But while enjoying the fine belongs to being a lover of the fine, love for the fine is not exhausted simply by enjoying the fine; it explains a range of stimulus conditions and related outputs: a lover of the fine 'enjoys the things one should and hates what one should' (*chairein* and *misein*; X.1.1172a22-23, cf. II.3.1104b12); 'desires the fine' (*oregesthai*; IX.8.1169a6), and 'chooses the fine in place of everything else' (*haireisthai*; 1169a31-32). Thus, since enjoyment is only one of the responses the fine elicits in a lover of the fine, the connection between being a lover of the fine and enjoying it is not vacuous.

Aristotle's stance on particular actions further illuminates the conceptual independence of enjoyment from character: although a lover of X should enjoy X-ing, she may on occasion fail to do so because factors not related to the action may interfere with the agent's enjoyment. For instance, a virtuous person, a lover of the fine, may not enjoy her virtuous action because of severe bodily pain. Acknowledging the defeasibility of pleasure as a criterion for a state of character, Aristotle calls pleasure a 'sign' for the relevant underlying state (II.3.1104b3-4): pleasure is not conceptually guaranteed even if a lover engages in a beloved activity. The lover's character guarantees the pleasure (and other responses) — as long as nothing psychologically interferes. Thus, on the ethical reading I have proposed, the claim that 'for as long as the sense-object and the sense are most outstanding (*kratistê*, 1174b29), or as they should (*hoion dei*, b34), there will always (*aei*, b30) be pleasure' should not be understood as a

conceptually true claim. It is, rather, a claim true *ceteris paribus*: unless something interferes, a virtuous person will enjoy virtuous action or more particularly the perceptions and thoughts integral to those actions.

Aristotle establishes a sufficiently firm connection between exercising the best state in relation to the best objects to set up his anti-Delian argument. He does not need to push back against the objection that virtuous action is always so frightful that one cannot possibly enjoy it — which would only be plausible for courage anyway³⁵ — but against the claim that ‘most pleasant, by nature, is getting what one loves.’ (EN I.8.1099a28) where ‘love’ probably has a sexual connotation.³⁶ By tying pleasure to character and by invoking the formability of character, Aristotle can show what one enjoys depends on one’s character, one’s second nature as it were. Although Aristotle does not explicitly mention the connection between love and pleasure in X.4.1174b28-1175a3 (quoted at the beginning of §3) he surely has not forgotten about it. Just a few lines later, seeking to explain why everyone desires pleasure (*oregesthai*, X.4.1175a10), Aristotle maintains that ‘each is active in relation to the things and by using those things [sc. faculties or states] which he loves (*agapa(i)*) most’ (a13), and pleasure completes these activities.³⁷ Aristotle expands on the connection between love and pleasure in the

35. Aristotle initially says, at II.3.1104b7-8, that the courageous person does frightening things ‘cheerfully, or at least without distress’, but later (in III.9) qualifies the sense in which a person in this situation does enjoy it. It seems important to him not to sever the tie between virtuous action and the agent’s enjoyment in the case of courage, however difficult it may be to maintain that there is necessarily pleasure in courageous action.

36. The Greek *eran* may be translated as ‘to love’ because our word, like the Greek, straddles both sexual and non-sexual uses. Another translations would be ‘to desire’. If Aristotle did not understand the Delian inscription to speak about sexual gratification, we could expect him to point out his partial agreement with the inscription. But both in the EN and EE he bluntly rejects it. I thank Christopher Taylor for helping me to understand the inscription properly.

37. While the semantic field of *agapan* differs slightly from that of *philein* (see Bonitz 1870 ad loc), Aristotle does not draw a distinction here, using the lover of understanding (*philomathês*) as example of the claim cited in the text: he would be active ‘with thought in relation to the objects of reflection, and so on in the case of

next argument, where he differentiates kinds of pleasure. Again, that pleasure perfects or completes an activity (a29-30) is put to use specifically in relation to lovers of the enjoyed activities: each lover of X has a congenial task (*oikeion ergon*) related to X that such a person will characteristically enjoy (*philomousoi, philoikodomoi*; 1175a34-5). Although he does not explicitly mention ‘love’ or ‘character’, Aristotle no doubt continues to assume that habitual enjoyment expresses character, and that activities eliciting such a response are congenial in the “good man” argument at the end of X.5. So, when he asks which tasks are congenial to human beings (esp. 1176a4), he asks which activities qua human being we habitually enjoy. Since the virtuous person is most fully human, or has developed human nature most fully, Aristotle identifies the pleasures stemming from the activity most congenial to human beings with those stemming from the exercise of virtue: those are the most fully human pleasures, and the best for human beings as such.

§6 Pleasure, activity, and the mean

I have offered an interpretation of Aristotle’s discussion of pleasure in Book X.4-5 that stresses the continuity with Book I by highlighting Aristotle’s protracted argument against the Delian inscription. Having sketched his answer that the best life is most pleasant because the good person loves the best and finest activities in Book I, Aristotle returns, in Book X, to narrowing down which aspect of the best activities causes the pleasure — perceptions and thoughts — and to explaining how the best pleasures follow on the best activities. The best activities of perception and thought, I have argued, are those integral to the best activities *tout court*, virtuous activities. The “ethical” reading of X.4 has the advantage of being able to explain why Aristotle

every other type too [sc. every other philo-X], and pleasure completes/perfects the activities, and so the life, that they pursue.’ (1175a14-16).

assumes that pleasure follows, as if automatically, on the best actions: barring interference, an agent will enjoy the best objects when her perception or thought belongs to activating the best states of character because having the best states of character predisposes the agent to love the best objects, and lovers habitually enjoy what they love.

By way of conclusion, I should like to address a critical point that will illustrate further how we are to understand the best activities. The point concerns, again, the relationship between pleasure and the best activity and comes out by considering the core claim contained in the passage quoted at the beginning of §3: ‘Pleasure completes/perfects the activity not in the way the disposition present in the subject perfects it, but as a sort of superadded end, like the bloom on those in their prime.’ (1174b31-3). Pleasure, Aristotle stresses, does not complete the activity in the way the state being activated completes it. A musician’s performance, for instance, is completed by her musical expertise, the state activated when playing. But that neither *is* pleasure, nor how pleasure completes the activity. Rather, in addition to being a musician, she must also be a lover of music if she is to habitually enjoy her performing. Although most musicians are lovers of music, there is a conceptual (and sometimes actual) difference: habitually enjoying the perfect music is detachable from perfect playing. Thus, in the musical case, we can identify the best activity and the best state without reference to pleasure, and in this sense pleasure is ‘a sort of superadded end’, an end neither contained in the activity, nor completing it in the way the activated disposition or state does. But can we identify the best activity in the ethical case likewise without reference to pleasure?

Aristotle must make the relation between the activity and the pleasure just right for his purpose. I have already explained how Aristotle ties the pleasure firmly to the

best activity; now I would like to correct the impression that pleasure and activity are too tightly linked. Aristotle gives pleasure the role of perfecting or completing the best activity. If the best activity is identified, in turn, as that which pleasure completes, Aristotle's account of pleasure would be hopelessly circular. Aristotle's account, however, shows more subtlety by identifying the best activity as an activity of perception or thought that comes about when the best state is active in relation to the best objects. On my interpretation, Aristotle does not narrowly identify the best objects with the beautiful, which, in turn, are objects an agent active with the best states would enjoy,³⁸ but rather with the fine in action. While a good agent can perform the best action without enjoyment due to some psychological interference, we may worry that the *ceteris paribus* clause merely masks a covert reference to the agent's enjoyment — in which case Aristotle's account would again be circular. But instead of fiddling with the characterisation of the *ceteris paribus* clause (Aristotle says hardly anything on the topic), Aristotle has a way of identifying the best actions without vacuous reference to pleasure via the concept of the mean.

Fine actions lie in the mean. Aristotle spells out the dimensions in which they must hit the middle to count as best: neither too much nor too little, at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right aim, and in the right way (1106b18-24). Since none of the dimensions of best and praiseworthy actions (b25-7) refers to pleasure, Aristotle has a way of identifying the best activities (and their perceptions and thoughts) to be perfected by pleasure without the air of circularity.³⁹ Thus for the best activities, too, when pleasure completes the best

38. Taylor 2008, 253-4.

39. Of course, Aristotle not only speaks about action in the mean, but also about mean affective responses at 1106b18-24 such as anger and desire — which fall broadly under the umbrella of pleasure and pain (II.5.1105a21-3). While affective states often motive or at least inform the actions, Aristotle nevertheless establishes criteria for evaluating

activities, pleasure does so ‘a sort of superadded end’ not necessarily contained in the specification of activity. As a superadded end, pleasure is, at least conceptually, detachable from the best activity, just as in the case of craft. However, pleasure is closer to the best activity *tout court* than pleasure in the best craft activity. For while the way in which a craftsman brings his product to the mean hardly matters for the evaluation of the product, the way in which one acts plays an important role in the determination of the best actions. In particular, only if the agent chooses the action for its own sake and from virtue does the action count as being done in the best way (i.e. virtuously) in addition to being best (i.e. virtuous; II.4.1105a26-b9). Since doing the best actions in the best way requires virtue, and virtue presupposes love for the fine and a lover of the fine habitually enjoys the fine, the virtuous person will habitually enjoy the best actions. While ‘performing the action in the best way’ may thus make reference to pleasure, the specification of the best activity itself does not — which gives Aristotle just the right proximity between action and the pleasure perfecting/completing it.

§7 Pleasure and contemplation

Finally, is the interpretation I have proposed too “ethical”? Does my reading of X.4 not preclude Aristotle from regarding the life of contemplation as the pinnacle of happiness? I do not think the “ethical” reading of X.4 commits us to taking the life of contemplation to be beyond Aristotle’s anti-Delian argument (whether for reasons regarding the composition of the EN or for philosophical reasons). So far I have taken ‘the most perfect/complete activity of thought’ in X.4 to refer to the intellectual aspect of virtuous action. However, the words used (*dianoia*; *theôria*, 1174b21) cover sufficient ground to apply also to the other intellectual virtue, intellectual

the action on its own. i.e. without taking into account the affective state promoting the action.

accomplishment (*sophia*). In fact, Aristotle explicitly resumes his argument from X.4 at the beginning of X.7 (1177a12-27). He follows the same schema of identifying the best activity here as in X.4: the activity of reflection is most outstanding (*kratistê*, 1177a19) because intelligence (*nous*) and its objects are most outstanding (a20-21)⁴⁰ — which entitles him to class reflection among the activities of excellence, calling it indeed the most pleasant one among them (1177a23-25).⁴¹

As with ethical virtue, love plays an important role in tying pleasure to the activity of contemplation, at least in the human case, as Aristotle's use of the word *philosophia* indicates (a25). Arguing that using one's *sophia* in relation to the right objects is especially enjoyable, Aristotle maintains that the use of *sophia* is most pleasant because 'the love of it (*philosophia*) is thought to bring with it pleasures amazing in purity and stability' (X.7.1177a25-26). As before, the argument here relies on the connection between being a *philo*-X and enjoying X. Aristotle not only presupposes that a person's love for a certain activity explains why she habitually enjoys it, but also that having and using *sophia* requires the person to have love for it (cf. X.4.1175a12-15).⁴² Since the pleasure derived from contemplation is most pure, and

40. While Aristotle merely says that the objects of the best thinking state are 'divine and fine' (1177a15), X.7 and VI.7 make clear that no objects of cognition are finer. The objects of *sophia* are the things that are by nature the most honourable (VI.7.1141b2-3), such as the constituent parts of the universe (b1-2).

41. We do not need to worry especially about the status of pleasure stemming from ethical virtue: if contemplation is the most pleasant activity, how could the activity of ethical virtue be the most pleasant (as previously claimed)? Just as the life of ethical virtue is secondarily happiest (1178a7-9), it will, presumably, also be secondarily most pleasant. Cf. n. 15.

42. It would be uncharitable to suppose that Aristotle would allow for cases in which a person has *sophia*, and can engage it, but no love for it, as this would significantly weaken the probative force of the *dokei goun* clause (a25) and of Aristotle's whole argument: he wants to show that those who have *sophia* have the most pleasant life. In her commentary on this passage Broadie rightly points out that *philosophia* 'is here exhibited as a learner's attitude' (Broadie and Rowe 2002, 442). I agree, but would, in parallel to ethical virtue, resist the implication that once one has attained intellectual accomplishment, one's love for it lapses.

purity, rather than intensity or duration determines what is most pleasant (X.5.1175b35-1176a3; see §2 ad fin.), the “ethical” reading of X.4 gives Aristotle all the means to unite the finest, best, and most pleasant in the life of contemplation.⁴³

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